An intimate conversation with pop's preeminent pair

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By Diane de Dubovay

They are a most extraordinary pair. Rich: They control a fortune rumoured to be in excess of one-half billion dollars. Famous: They are heirs to the golden legend of the Beatles. Yet Paul and Linda McCartney, married now for 15 years, seem determined to be nothing other than ordinary people. In many aspects of their life, they cling ferociously to their working roots and attitudes.

Says 42-year-old Paul: “I don’t want to be lonely guy on the hill—like J. Paul Getty.” Although Paul was knighted by the queen of England, the McCartneys do not mix with the high society. “We live and work with ordinary people,” he says. “We don’t stray much into the upper classes. We don’t go to hunt balls. Our children aren’t debs.”

“Rich people’s big homes usually feel so empty,” Linda observes. Instead, the McCartneys and their four children live in the Sussex countryside in a modest, five-bedroom home of Paul’s own design, overrun with animals and children, where the center of family life is the kitchen. There are no servants—just Rose, a cockney cleaning lady who comes in once a week “to do the heavy work” and some occasional baby-sitting. Linda, who was born into the affluence of maids, country clubs and East Coast American-establishment life, does all the housework and child-rearing herself. And she has the dark circles under her eyes and the dishpan hands to prove it.

“I consider myself a peasant,” she says. “I guess I rebelled against the privilege I was born into. To tell you the truth, I never had a friend in my life until I moved to Arizona, except one girlfriend from high school. I’m not a girly, gossipy person. I always got along very nicely with animals. My kids are my best friends.”

“There’s nothing wrong with living in the grand manner, but I was never comfortable with it. I found it pretentious and shallow. I never liked having servants around. It’s not just an invasion of your privacy—after a while, you been to feel like they own you.”

As they talk, Paul constantly squeezes Linda’s arm reassuringly, strokes her hand or looks to her for approval or agreement whenever he makes a point. The two are inclined to talk at once or to finish each other’s sentences. At times, the link is so tight, they seem almost like different aspects of one person.

Linda has been attacked by the British press, viciously at times, for her lack of artifice and style. On the day of this interview, she is wearing a simple wool pullover sweater, plain flannel skirt, Mickey Mouse ankle socks and worn walking shoes. Yet the tousled blond hair, lack of makeup,

unshaven legs and serviceable clothes seem to be her way of saying, “Look, I’m too busy living to bother with being a glamour girl.” And, in person, it is this naturalness and modesty that make Linda so appealing.

Says Paul: “I value common sense, earthiness, no bull, kindness, no airs and graces. I hate people who don’t have any earth to them. I hate to be around people who just crumble in a crisis—or with whom you can’t have a good laugh.

“What do I like best about Linda? She’s loving, emotional, practical—and sexy. Yes, I like a bit of emotion. We have our rows and disagreements. People have this image of us—‘Oh, isn’t it wonderful; the perfect marriage.’ But our marriage isn’t an idyll. We had a row the day before we got married and nearly called off the wedding.

“I’d characterize our relationship as rather volatile. But we’re not bored. We’re still interested in each other. It’s lusty. We have wonderful children and a lovely marriage. And yes, I expect it to go on forever.”

How do they resolve their rows? “You don’t speak to each other for about three years,” Linda quips half-jokingly. “One of us finally gives in,” she adds seriously. “Usually me.”

“Ah now, wait a minute,” Paul teases. “If you’re not careful, we may end up having a row.” And then he adds, “We may separate for a moment, get in separate rooms… while we calm down.”

The McCartneys met in a London rock club called Bag O’Nails back in the sixties. “It sounds silly,” says Linda, “but our eyes met and something just clicked. It was like a cartoon.”

“We were both with other friends,” Paul recalls. “I saw this blond across the room and I fancied her. So when she passed my table, I said something stupid like, ‘Hello, how are you? Let me take you away from all this.’ Linda happened to know one of the friends I was with. So after chatting for a bit, we left and went to another club. Linda had come over from America to do photographs for a book on rock stars.”

Stories about how Linda “chased” Paul have been rampant ever since. But, in reality, it was the other way around. Theirs was an on-and-off courtship—or, as Paul puts it, “an on and on-hold relationship,” due to the fact that they were usually separated by continents and oceans. Linda had been married before—unhappily—and was raising a daughter from that marriage, Heather, on her own while working as a struggling free-lance photographer in New York.

The first time Paul proposed, they were in Chinatown. He had spotted a Buddhist temple. “Buddhist-Shmuddist,” he said. “Let’s get married. We’ll be done in half an hour.”

“No way,” said Linda.

“Fair enough,” said Paul, and they went out for a Chinese dinner.

“I come from a very academic family,” Linda explains. “My father was brilliant. My brother was brilliant. They both went to Harvard Law School and did very well. I was not a good student. All I ever cared about were animals, rock music and photography. I was a great disappointment to my family. When I got married [to a geologist] and moved to Arizona, it was crazy. I had been pressured by men all my life. I rather liked being on my own, making my own decisions. I had actually sworn to myself that I would never get married again.”

Back in London, a slight obstacle to their romance was Paul’s well-publicised live-in affair with British actress Jane Asher. “It’s funny,” observes Paul. “Before I met Linda, I had been to a clairvoyant in Brighton and she told me, ‘You’re going to marry a blond and have four children.’ ‘A blond? My girlfriend’s a redhead, and we surely don’t intend to have four children.’ Most people thought I was due to marry Jane Asher—I rather thought I was, too. But I just kept remembering Linda, this nice blond American girl.

“Both Linda and I were ravers back then,” Paul admits. “But that’s one of the reasons our marriage has worked. We had both sown our wild oats and gotten it out of our system. We got it all out before we were married.

“I persuaded Linda to come to London for a visit. Then I rang Heather in New York and said, ‘Heather, will you marry me?’ She was five. ‘No, don’t be silly,’ she said. ‘I’m too young.’ ‘Well, I can wait,’ I said. So we went to New York and brought her back to London to live with us, and I twisted Linda’s arm and finally she agreed to marry me. Linda was afraid it wouldn’t work out. And I kept telling her, ‘Aw, come on, it will be fine. Don’t worry.’ I’m still telling her that.”

It was Linda’s influence, apparently, that brought the boozing, pub-crawling Paul back to his family and roots and that probably helped him survive the wealth, violence and dissipation that tainted so many others on the pop-music scene. Of the show-biz cronies he hung out with in that period, Paul recalls, “We were crazy—and openly crazy. Living the artist’s life in London.

“Around about that time, in the sixties, people started to say that family life was finished, that family as a unit was gone. We saw all that talk come and go: ‘People don’t want to get married anymore; women are asserting themselves.’ We just didn’t go for it. We knew that was supposed to be the fashion. Many of our friends were not getting married but were having common-law marriages and calling their kids funny names like Zowie or Wow or Moondust. Can you imagine a kid at 10 with a name like Zowie? All the other kids in school would make fun of him.

“It was a media trip. Maybe some journalists or some artist friends of mine in London weren’t getting married, but everyone I knew in Liverpool was. And I’m sure Philadelphia steel workers were still getting married. They didn’t listen to all that rubbish.

“I remember announcing to the other Beatles that we’d called our first daughter Mary. And they said, ‘Mary? Really?’ ‘Yeah,’ I said. It’s a nice, sweet, traditional name. Lovely. My mum was called Mary. And Stella, another daughter, is named after my grandma. It just seemed depressingly ordinary to them.”

Although the McCartneys have made a few close friends among their neighbours and among musicians and artists with whom they have worked, their social life has always revolved around the family. “My mum and dad didn’t have friends,” recalls Paul, who holds up his working-class parents as the ideal against which he had always measured his own personal life. “They had relatives—aunties, uncles and cousins. As I was growing up, I was always having babies thrust at me. It was like a big Italian family.

“Lind and I went to visit John and Yoko after they had their baby, and they said, ‘Don’t touch the baby—he doesn’t know you.’ That just shows the difference between us. Just this morning, Linda and I were in a restaurant and I picked up a lady’s baby and was saying, ‘Coochie, coochie.’”

At the mention of John Lennon, whom Paul regarded as a brother, his nerves still go raw. During the tortured, acrimonious breakup of the Beatles, John used his songs to publicly insult Paul. One particularly cruel reference to Paul’s musical abilities was a line which went: “Your songs are like Muzak to my ears.”

“Obviously, I was hurt by that stuff,” admits Paul. “But you have to understand about John. If you actually look at John’s life, in a nutshell, you find a kid whose father had run away from home when he was three. So he’s got to have felt a little deflated by that. Then he lived with his aunt and uncle, not with his mother. Then the uncle died, and he was brought up by his aunt. Then when he was 16, his mother came to visit and was killed—knocked down outside his house by a police car. And then he got married and that didn’t work. He didn’t get on with his first son because, due to his background, he didn’t know how to be with kids. Not to be big-headed, but I always got on with babies.

“John idolised his mother. But she was living with this guy we didn’t like too much. I remember her well. We both used to really like her because she played a bit of banjo, and she got John into guitar. She used to sing, ‘Girl of My Dreams,’ and that was always his favourite song. So what I’m saying about John is, he didn’t have too much luck until he met Yoko.

“It was a weird time. The people who were managing us were whispering in our ears and trying to turn us against each other and it became like a feuding family. In the end, I think John had some tough breaks. He used to say, ‘Everyone is on the McCartney bandwagon.’ He wrote ‘I’m Just A Jealous Guy’, and he said that the song was about me. So I think it was just some kind of jealousy. I had to try and forgive John because I sort of knew where he was coming from. I knew that he was trying to get rid of the Beatles in order to say to Yoko, ‘Look, I’ve even given that up for you. I’m ready to devote myself to you and to the avant-garde.’ I don’t know if it’s true. One

thing I'm really glad about is that I didn't answer him back. It's very difficult to do that when someone is attacking you. But I would have felt sick as a dog now if I had."

Paul and Linda say they created their band Wings so that Paul could stay in training as a musician and get back to his musical roots by performing in small halls, which provide close give-and-take between audience and artist.

But the McCartneys came under savage attack for having the audacity to present Linda, an untrained musician, onstage. "At Paul's age," says David Thorpe, a London photographer who worked with Paul for years, "Cole Porter was writing his greatest music. Paul needs the stimulus of great artists around him—because he really is a wonderful musician. What people object to is that by keeping Linda around, and including her in his act, he is making children's music instead of stretching and reaching his full potential."

In retrospect, Paul says, "Linda's inclusion in the band was like saying, 'Would you like to play tennis with Bjorn Borg?' We can see that now. We couldn't see it then. It might have been wise to insist that Linda take a lot of lessons, or for both of us to go on a big TV talk show to explain ourselves. I just basically wanted Linda with me—instead of her staying at home while I was out on tour somewhere."

In recent years, at Paul's urging, Linda has put the instruments aside to devote herself full time to homemaking as an art. "Linda really doesn't like housework," Paul explains, "because when she grew up, her family had maids and she wasn't taught to do anything. But it's something I've tried to tell Linda about because in the kind of family I'm from, housework is considered a pleasure—the smell of ironing and the laundry. Where I'm from, once a week, the women would sort of get the laundry out and smell the washing and feel it and see it and iron it all, and they'd be chatting or listening to the radio. It was like a peasant thing. It was an event, like treading on the grapes.

"I know it sounds a bit chauvinistic," says Paul, slightly embarrassed, "but it's how I was brought up."

The McCartney family schedule is late to bed ("after the last program on the telly goes off") and early to rise. Linda is up and preparing breakfast by 7 A.M. There is no nightclubbing. "We've done all that," says Paul, "and we're bored with it."

The question is, with all their money, how will Paul and Linda ease their children into the kind of normal adult life they value? "We're going to spend it all, then they won't have a problem," says Linda.

"Actually," says Paul, "we've taken a very conscious approach. Our kids have been brought up in the state school system. They don't go to private schools. It's not that we're against people having privilege. But I figure if we did that with our kids, they'd have privilege and then more privilege.

“So what we’ve tried to do is bring them up like they’re not going to inherit anything—ever. Like we’ve spent it all. They’re being brought up just like ordinary kids. They go to ordinary schools; they do exams, just like everyone else. They go to discos. They do everything ordinary. We’ve got arrangements that if we die, they’ll get whatever money is left, just like in any normal family. But there are no trust funds.

“The idea is,” says Paul, “if we can get their feet on the ground and see that they grow up as normal people, then they won’t hate someone just because he’s a bus conductor—or because he’s big or small. You know, they can actually talk to a street cleaner and not think, ‘Oh, this man’s beneath me.’ My kids don’t behave like that.”

“I don’t know how much money I have,” says Paul, who recently wrote and starred in the $10 million Give My Regards to Broad Street. “My dad never told my mum how much he earned. Linda still doesn’t know. You could never convince me that I had earned enough.” Strange as it seems, Paul retains his working-class mentality about money and is convinced that if he stops working, he might lose it all. Already taxed 80 to 90 per cent of his income, he worries about a communist takeover in socialist England.

“I dragged myself up off a Liverpool back street,” he says, “with all that touring and hard work, and a friend of mine explained to me that if there were a communist takeover they might take it all away.” At this, Linda becomes alarmed. “Don’t worry Lin,” he says reassuringly. “I’ve checked it out. They can’t.”

“Paul can’t be earning what they say,” says Linda. “It’s mad. My philosophy about money is that as long as we have enough to live on, with a little extra in the bank, we don’t need any more. I live as if I don’t have a lot of money. I don’t wear jewelry, for example. As far as food goes, we’re vegetarian, so that’s very cheap. I don’t do it for health reasons, but because I love animals.”

“I’m ambitious,” says Paul. “I’m a fighter, a builder, a go-getter. And I wouldn’t want to switch that ambition off. Linda is more content than I am. She’s not as ambitious, which I think is good. If I said to her, ‘You’ve got your house, your animals, your kids, that will do you,’ she’d say, ‘Fine.’

“I’ve got all these contingency plans. I tend to look at the worst side of things. I’ll say, ‘If they turn us down, we’re going to do this.’ If anything hurts me, I want to fight it—so it doesn’t hurt me again.”

Not surprisingly, luxury to Linda is “a noncook holiday,” such as the one the McCartneys enjoyed last winter in Gstaad, Switzerland. “We rented a chalet and hired a cook and a cleaning lady so I got to go out skiing all day,” says Linda. “It was heaven.”

“That is luxury,” Paul agrees. “But to actually live like that all the time would get on your nerves, I think. You appreciate a holiday like that because you don’t have it all the time. At home, we all end up in the kitchen. I think that’s universal. There’s a big table there, and everybody always

sits around the table. That's where the food is—where the action is: sitting down to a meal with children in an atmosphere of warmth, mutual trust and family harmony. Being able to discuss your problems with people you love—there's not a lot better than that in life.

"Growing up in Liverpool, that was always there for me. Even after my mum died, my aunties came around religiously every week and cooked and cleaned the house and did the laundry and provided that kind of atmosphere for us."

"My parents were married for 25 years and they were like young lovers," says Linda. "Paul's parents were the same. If you're lucky, you get that in life. You see, those are the kinds of things that matter to me—not the diamond necklace."